

## *Felix Scragge's Next Of Kin*

BY JUDGE CLARK

An expert conveyancer is Death. At a stroke, he makes over to Dives junior all the possessions of Dives senior, leaving the latter to go begging in another world even for a drop of water. Hard on Dives senior, you will say, but quite considerate, you must allow, toward Dives junior, whose grief might prove overpowering but for the distraction afforded by new responsibilities.

But we are putting the moral before the story.

Felix Scragge had griped and ground and cheated—cheated himself of every comfort and others of their money—till there he lay, at last, murdered for his pelf. It was a sickening sight, that ghastly, mutilated corpse, on whose features death had crystallized a look of agony and terror. Men shuddered at it; and *one* could not bear even to look upon it; but that was a distant relative, who was next of kin to the deceased, and it was natural *he* should be more deeply affected than the rest.

The iron safe in Mr. Scragge's bedroom was found open, and Mr. Scragge's body stretched before it. But the murderer had risked his neck to little purpose; for Mr. Scragge's money was all snug in bank, the safe containing nothing but papers "valuable only to the owner;" which must have been great solace to the distant relative and next of kin, Giles Hardy by name.

One evening, a month later, a gray-haired man and a young and beautiful maiden sat together in earnest conference. The faces of both wore a pained and troubled look.

"Do not press me further to-night, father," the girl pleaded. "Spare me yet a few hours the shame of proclaiming my own faithlessness, and the misery of pronouncing my own doom!"

"But Mr. Hardy insists on an answer tomorrow, and—"

"Be it to-morrow then, and let me give it to himself."

"Remember, Constance, how completely we are in his power. My whole property stood mortgaged to Mr. Scragge. At his death, this mortgage, with his other effects, passed to his kinsman, Giles Hardy, who has seen fit to tender you his hand. Reject it, and we can hardly hope for a continuance of that forbearance to which we are at this moment indebted for the roof that shelters us. You speak of faithlessness. You forget that when you agreed to become Ivan Austin's wife, circumstances were widely different. Misfortune had not yet placed us in a position that left no choice between beggary and the acceptance of an offer like the present. Besides, would it be just to Ivan, himself poor, to claim fulfillment of an inconsiderate promise at the moment he is struggling to enter a profession in which, for years to come, he can barely hope to win his own bread? And your father—" his voice faltered at the mention of himself. "Do not be selfish, Constance."

"Selfish, father! Do not chide me with that—it is more than I can bear! I will pray to God for guidance tonight. If He points me no other way out of this strait, His will, not mine, be done!"

As she bent to receive his good-night kiss, Andrew Norman looked up in his daughter's saddened face, so like her dead mother's, and pitied her—pitied her *almost* as much as he pitied himself.

That evening Giles Hardy reclined in an easy chair, before a cheerful fire, in a handsomely furnished apartment. He had set in for an evening's solid comfort, and was taking it, when a visitor was shown in—a shabby-genteel stranger, who wished to see Mr. Hardy on particular business.

“What was it?” Mr. Hardy asked.

“You were knocked down and robbed about a month ago,” said Shabby-Genteel, with the air of a man recalling a pleasant recollection.

The fact was undeniable; but, for some strange reason, Mr. Hardy had never mentioned it. The occurrence having taken place on the same night on which his respected relative had been murdered, the greater calamity had probably overshadowed the less. Thus suddenly reminded of it, the gentleman gave a start, and suspiciously eyed his visitor.

“It was *I* that robbed you,” the latter continued, as blandly as before.

Mr. Hardy turned pale; but it was a curious fact that, though that the bell-rope hung near, he neither rang nor called for assistance.

“I got very little money,” the stranger added; “but there was a paper—”

“Villain!” exclaimed Hardy, springing to his feet, and cocking and presenting a pistol, “Give it to me instantly! By Heaven, you shall not leave this room alive with it!”

“Come, come, Mr. Hardy, *you're* not a fool, and don't take *me* for one. Sensible folks don't shoot folks in a way to leave the corpse on their hands. Besides, it would be murder, and nothing made by it, which isn't your style, you know. I haven't the document about me. I've come to offer you a bargain.”

“Name your terms,” growled Hardy, putting up his pistol and motioning the stranger to a seat.

“Meet me tomorrow night,” said the latter, “at a place I shall name, with two thousand dollars, and for that sum I'll place the paper in your hands.”

Hardy groaned. As a man loves his own soul, and better, he loved money. He tried beating down. He began low, and bid gradually up, contesting every inch of ground. But the stranger was inflexible.

“I'm a one-price man,” he answered, “and have named my figure.”

The paper must have been deemed of great value by Mr. Hardy, for he yielded at last, and the bargain was struck on his opponent's terms—a rare thing in his dealings—and a place and hour were appointed for its fulfillment.

Constance Norman was not called on to give her answer next day. Giles Hardy had other things to think of.

The night was dark and the place lonely; but punctual to the minute, the late contracting parties met.

“I may as well apprise you, Mr. Hardy,” said the stranger, “that I have come here armed; and should you attempt your little game of last night, it will simply be a question of who's quickest.”

“Have no fear,” answered Hardy. “I have no design to offer you harm. As to the two thousand dollars, I am sorry to say I have found it impossible to raise so considerable a sum on so short notice. If *half* would suffice—”

“Certainly it wouldn't, Mr. Hardy. A bargain's a bargain, and business *is* business. Then, all things considered, I've let you off cheap. The paper's not the only secret in my keeping. I saw you both enter and leave Felix Scragge's house that night. I heard the strokes that beat out the old man's brains, and heard his feeble cry of ‘murder!’ I supposed you had killed him for his money, and sought to rob you of it, but got little for my pains except this trumpety paper, and now I must try to make my own out of it. If you're not ready tonight, come tomorrow night. After that I must look for a market elsewhere.”

“Should I comply with your demands,” said Hardy, “what guarantee have I of your silence, or against further extortion?”

“The honor that exists among—such gentlemen as you and me,” answered the other.

Hardy drew from his pocket a roll of notes, while his companion opened the slide of a dark lantern. Hardy turned up the ends of the bills in the light, enabling the stranger to count them, at the same time exposing the little fib he had indulged in. The amount was exactly two thousand dollars.

The stranger produced, in turn, a folded document, which he opened and held up for Hardy's inspection. And thus they stood, Hardy clutching the money, the stranger the paper. Marvelously little faith had either in that principle of honor one of them had so lately appealed to.

Just then a low whistle was heard. In an instant the two were surrounded by a number of men whose forms seemed suddenly moulded out of the darkness.

“What do you want?” exclaimed Hardy, hastily concealing the money.

“We *did* want *this* gentleman,” replied one of the captors. “He's an old acquaintance that we have several scores to settle with. But I guess we'll want you *both* now.”

“You can have nothing to do with me,” said Hardy, with forced calmness; “I am well known here, and my identity is easily established.”

“Oh! *we* know you very well, Mr. Hardy; but after what we’ve overheard, we couldn’t think of parting with you. Truth is we’ve done a better night’s work than we counted on. In tracking Jem Stokes, we’d no notion of stumbling on Mr. Scragge’s murderer.”

Before he could reply, Giles Hardy’s wrists were in a pair of handcuffs, which clinked audibly as he shook with fear. But what was the mysterious paper, of which his anxiety to gain possession had brought him into his present predicament? Let us read it, with the officer, by the light of Jem Stokes’ lantern. “In the name of God, amen!” had been the first line, but that was erased. Then followed:

“I, Felix Scragge, do make and publish this my last will and testament.

“I give and bequeath all the property and estate of which I may die possessed, subject to the payment of my debts and funeral expenses, to Ivan Austin of —. I got my start in life by defrauding his father of a large sum; for which act it is my sincere hope Providence may accept these presents as some atonement. It is the best bargain I can offer.

“Witness my hand and seal, this 2<sup>nd</sup> day of December 18—.                      FELIX SCRAGGE, L.S.

“Witnessed by: *Thomas Long, John Short.*”

And that was the document to gain possession of which Giles Hardy had knocked out his rich relative’s brains, and of which he had himself been robbed immediately after.

The will had been written years before, by Felix Scragge himself; and the two witnesses, who knew nothing of its contents, had removed to a distance. They were easily found, however, and due proof was made of the instrument.

We need hardly add that Ivan Austin didn’t turn his father-in-law out of doors.

Giles Hardy, true to his instincts, cheated the gallows by becoming his own executioner. Jem Stokes is making shoes for the State.

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